

Harold K. Schneider. *The Africans: An Ethnological Account*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981) x, 278 pp., \$9.95.

Schneider's *The Africans* offers a provocative interpretation of African society. Unlike other introductory texts, Schneider is not concerned with an exhaustive or even representative survey of African life; rather, his concern is to put forth a non-Marxist social-cultural-economic theory of African society which would provide a broad analytical framework. He succeeds in sketching, in this comparatively slim volume, a sweeping new view of African society. (Cf., G. P. Murdock, *Africa, Its Peoples and Their Culture History*, New York, 1959; James L. Gibbs, Jr., ed., *Peoples of Africa*, New York, 1965; Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans*, Garden City, New York, 1971; and Lucy Mair, *African Societies*, Cambridge, 1974.)

Schneider wastes little time in dispelling myths. Chapter 1, "Perspectives on Africa," begins with the sentence, "There is no way to describe Africans objectively," (p. 2) He explains how worldviews affect perceptions of others and how the Western worldview contrasts with that of the African. Schneider delineates the various Western approaches to the study of Africa--race or physical types, cultural evolution diffusionism, functionalism, Marxism, and finally, the author's view which is characterized as "essentially deductive." That "deductive approach" is perhaps a consequence of the author's "formalist" economic perspective which applies its hypotheses deductively to African societies largely because of the gaps in the historical or ethnographic record. At the risk of being labelled an economic determinist, Schneider proposes that perhaps the most fruitful explanation of social dynamics derives from an examination of the kinds (quality) and levels (quantity) of production, unlike the Marxist focus on the *modes* of production. "Economics," writes schneider, "is a proven good strategy in accomplishing explanation." (p. 24) In *The Africans* Schneider extends, in a generalized interpretation of African society as a whole, his earlier economic studies, most notably, *The Wahi Wanyaturu, Economics in an African Society* (1970) and *Economic Man* (1974). The economic explanation proves to be exceedingly productive; for example, the viewing of marriage, descent, and association as social exchange or social economics helps cut through the tangle and intricacies of functionalist kinship studies.

Schneider agrees with the Marxist criticism of

structural-functionalist theory as static and consequently valueless in attempting solutions to human problems and needs which are dynamic. Wrote Schneider,

I am not going to describe a static, unchanging, "traditional" Africa that existed before modern development forces intruded. African groups, like all groups, have always been changing and developing. . . .My purpose is to describe the nature of nonindustrial and non-Arab African society and culture, both as they existed immediately preceding the impact of colonialism and Arabism and insofar as they continue to exist. To do so is sufficient reason unto itself. In addition, this will be a useful background for an examination of the course of modern events, which are heavily affected by the conditions of the immediate past. (p. 25)

Chapters two and nine attempt to make that connection between ethnography and history by providing the historical setting of sub-Saharan Africa from prehistory to colonial times and examining the impact of various historical factors on contemporary African development.

While critical of the structural-functionalists, Schneider adopts their notions of culture element and the systemic nature of society and culture, and rejects Marxist analysis as essentially doctrinaire in its preoccupation with identifying an exploiting class and its assumption of inherent structural weaknesses in any social system. *The Africans*, therefore, stands in a solitary position between British social anthropology and Marxist anthropology, benefitting from both but in fundamental agreement with neither. Schneider deductively applies his theory to four basic elements of African society, material economics (Chapter 3), kinship (Chapters 4 and 5), power and authority (chapter 6), and religion and philosophy (Chapters 7 and 8). The application is compelling: at the very least, controversial.

Despite its intentions, the book lacks a clear historical sense of change over time and the attempted linkages seem strained and contrived, pointing to the extreme difficulty in integrating good ethnography with history. Nonetheless, Schneider's basic message is not lost. A second major flaw may be the author's selective use of ethnographic data and the rather thin supportive evidence. But therein also resides the author's unique contribution in proceeding undaunted through the deductive approach described above.

The enormous value of *The Africans* lies in its enlightening critique of both the structural-function-alists and Marxists in its attempts to blend formalist economic anthropology with historical explanation, and in its underlying assumption that the ultimate value of any such intellectual undertaking rests with its utility in helping solve human problems. Schneider concludes: "Helping Africans help themselves will in turn promote egalitarianism (democracy) which seems to be a social end most people can agree on."

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